

CHAPTER ONE

SEPTEMBER 1913

**T**he rain taps the windowpane with cold, thin fingers as if it wants to get in.

I tap my desk with my own cold fingers because I want to get out. I don't like school and I don't like teachers. I want to climb trees and go fishing and never sit indoors in another classroom as long as I live.

Most of all, I want to see my mother. She's the most wonderful person in the whole world. I never say that out loud because the other boys would tease me, but it's true.

No matter how bold I've been Mam always understands that I meant no harm. She never loses her temper the way my father does. I can go to her with any problem.

Could go to her with any problem. But not any more.

The rain's falling harder now. Autumn is the worst time of the year. It's cold and grey and everything's dying.

My mother is very ill. When I go up to her room they tell me I'm in the way. I keep going back, though; I can't help it. It's like I can hear her calling to me, even though she hardly makes a sound these days.

My father's talking about sending me to the Christian Brothers. I overheard him say to Aunt Nell, 'I don't understand John Joe at all. I simply cannot cure the boy of acting out. Let the Brothers put manners on him like they did me.'

If my father caught me eavesdropping he would punish me severely. He punishes me a lot. Sometimes I don't even know what I've done wrong.

Mam hates it when he takes me out into the yard to cane me. I've seen her peer down from the upstairs window and beat her poor pale hands against the glass. Now she's too weak to get out of bed. I can remember when she was strong. When I was little and had nightmares Mam would hold me so tight that I knew nothing could hurt me ever.

My mother's widowed sister Nell has been stopping with us since Mam fell ill. She has her own little cottage in County Kildare and I wish she'd go back

there. Aunt Nell smells like pickles and looks down her long thin nose at everyone except Mam. She only puts up with me for my mother's sake. She's well able for my father, though. Sometimes she takes my side just to annoy him.

'Beating won't improve John Joe,' I heard her say to him. 'The boy's rebellious enough already, that's why he was expelled from the National School.'

I'm not rebellious, I just hate being treated like a baby when I'm twelve years old. Well, almost twelve. I can read far above my age, but the adults don't give me credit for any brains at all. They should answer my questions and tell me how my mother really is. Week after week she gets paler and thinner. I'm awfully worried, but there's no one I can talk to about it.

Since Mam's been confined to her room my father's been beating me more than ever. Not because I've been bold, but just because I'm there.

Sending me to this school was Aunt Nell's idea. 'It will be perfect for John Joe,' she said. 'The fees are reasonable, and the courses include a thorough education in the classics. The pupils are kept busy from dawn until dark so there's no time to get into mischief.'

I didn't like the sound of that.

My father started to tell Aunt Nell to mind her own business, then changed his mind. They row a lot but he

never goes too far. He's afraid Aunt Nell might leave. Then he would have to hire someone to care for Mam. He wouldn't like that. My father's always complaining about how much things cost – though he seems able to find plenty of money for drink.

Anyway he had Aunt Nell pack my things in a suitcase, and sent me here in a taxicab. I'm to be a boarder, trapped in this place day and night. I'm even forbidden to return home on the weekends though it's an easy bicycle ride. My father would not let me bring my bicycle.

Before the taxicab came for me, I ran up to Mam's room to tell her goodbye. She looked so small and frail in her bed. When she put up her poor thin arms to hug me there was no strength left in them. 'Be a good boy, John Joe,' she whispered against my cheek. Her breath was so warm on my skin it brought a lump to my throat.

Mam hardly ever speaks above a whisper any more, except when the doctor comes to the house. He makes her cry out. Once I ran into her room and hit him, and they had to pull me off him. If they would let me stay with Mam no one would ever hurt her again. I would protect her, so I would, like she used to protect me.

Instead I'm stuck in this dreadful place.

The Headmaster is watching me. He's a big, solid-

built man, who wears a professor's black gown over his street clothes so he looks very solemn and dignified. I suppose he could be called handsome except for a slight squint in one eye.

This is only my second day here but I hate him already.

'John Joe, do I have your attention?' the Head asks. The other boys turn around in their seats to look at me. I hate them too.

'Yes sir.'

He walks along between the desks and stops by mine. When he looks down at me I lift my chin and glare back, to show I'm not afraid of him.

Then something funny happens. He seems to see right inside me. Can he tell that I'm afraid after all? 'I know this is difficult for you, lad,' the Head says in a gentle voice, 'but you're among friends here.'

I don't want his sympathy. I just want to go home.

The boy whose bed is to the right of mine in the dormitory is called Roger. He's a stocky lad who gives himself airs because his father's a bank manager. The boy on my left is the son of a man who stokes the furnace in one of the big hotels. Yet we're all treated alike. We sleep on identical narrow iron beds and take our meals together in the refectory. The same meals for everyone.

There are no special treats for boys who can pay extra.

When I first saw St Enda's I was astonished. I never imagined ordinary Irish boys could have a school like this. It's an eighteenth-century house built in the Georgian style; a small mansion really, three storeys high, with classical columns across the front. When the sun shines on the granite walls they look almost golden. The house was built as a country retreat for the gentry, and was named the Hermitage. One can imagine wealthy men in tall hats and pretty ladies in white dresses playing croquet on the lawn.

Now the sign on the wrought iron gates at the foot of the drive reads 'Scoil Éanna'— Saint Enda's School. There is a playing field for sports instead of croquet. In fact, or so Aunt Nell told me, everything about the school has been planned with the health and happiness of the students in mind.

I don't believe her. What sort of school does that?

The interior of the Hermitage is surprisingly plain, almost underfurnished. There aren't any rugs except in the drawing room, and footsteps echo on the stairs. I get the feeling that the Pearses don't have much money to spend on luxuries. But everything is neat and clean. All the woodwork is polished to a deep, rich glow. One can smell the beeswax that's used on the furniture, and the lavender that's sprinkled on the bed linen.

Someone spends a lot of love and care on this house.

Mam used to spend love and care on our house, which is not nearly so grand as this one. Just a red-brick terraced house with a broken iron railing in front. The bricks are blackened with coal dust.

I want to go home.

The Hermitage stands in its own parkland, comprising fifty acres near the village of Rathfarnham. From the great tall windows, one can see the nearby Dublin mountains. There are spectacular views in every direction. The lawns around the house are dotted with trees and shrubs and flower borders. There is also an orchard, plus a poultry yard and a walled vegetable garden convenient to the kitchen at the rear of the house.

Fifty acres is a lot of land, especially to a city lad like me. On my first full day at St Enda's, the boy called Roger was assigned to show me around the grounds. Roger had a bag of sweets in his pocket and ate them one after another, but he didn't offer any to me. He even walked in front of me so I couldn't see how many he was eating.

I could see how broad his backside was, though. From behind he looked like our coal man's horse. Watching him plod along in front of me gave me the first smile I've had in a long time.

After a short walk, the smooth lawns around the Hermitage gave way to a woodland alive with songbirds. Inviting paths meandered off in every direction. 'Stay behind me or you'll get lost,' Roger said, as if I was too stupid to find my own way. I ignored him. I told myself, 'I don't take orders from horses who pull coal wagons.' Then I smiled again.

The woods were amazing. I never saw so many trees perfect for climbing! There was even a miniature mountain glen with a rushing stream at the bottom, and a deep, cold pool. Roger told me the boys were allowed to swim there. He also showed me a little stone building called 'Emmet's Fort', that could be almost anything. 'We like to play pirates here,' he said.

I would enjoy playing pirates, if I felt like playing at all.

St Enda's is very much a family affair. The Headmaster, his widowed mother, his two sisters, and his brother, live here at the school. Their rooms are up at the top of the house. The women take care of the housekeeping and everyone teaches classes as well, except for the Head's mother. She's the cook. I have to say, the food here is better than I get at home. My aunt only knows how to cook bacon and cabbage, beans on toast, or boiled mutton. Full stop. Yesterday at St Enda's we were served the most gorgeous roast chicken and

stuffing, seasoned with herbs from the walled garden. I said I wasn't hungry – I didn't think I was – but before I knew it, I'd cleaned my plate.

The students raise most of the fruit and vegetables we eat, and the eggs and chickens too. It's actually part of our course of study. I never heard of such a thing before.

One of my new classmates claims, 'Vegetables taste better when you've grown them yourself.'

He may think so but I never shall. I hate vegetables. Brussels sprouts, ugh!

Roger complains because there is no heat in the dormitory. He's a Protestant boy, one of the first I've ever met. There are several here, however. Roger's family has a big detached house in Rathgar. He keeps a sepia photograph of it on the windowsill nearest his bed and keeps whinging about how uncomfortable St Enda's is by comparison. 'At home we have a fireplace in every room,' he claims.

I doubt it. I never heard of anyone who had a fireplace in every room.

The Headmaster's brother tells Roger, 'Sleeping in a cold room is better for you. At St Enda's we hope to build healthy bodies as well as good minds.'

I hate the Headmaster. He's a cold, aloof man, like headmasters everywhere. The sudden appearance of

the Head, or even the sound of his footstep in the corridor, is enough to put an end to the roughest horseplay.

I want to hate his brother, too, but it's hard to hate Willie. He likes us to call him Willie, there's nothing pompous or aloof about him. He's a dark, slender man with a shy smile. Willie teaches art at St Enda's and Margaret, the Head's older sister, teaches French. Willie also coaches handball in a court behind the main building. We're encouraged to take part in a wide variety of sports, but if there's something we really don't enjoy we don't have to do it.

'Sport teaches discipline,' the Headmaster says. 'You are allowed a high degree of personal freedom at St Enda's, but remember: true freedom can exist only where there is self discipline.'

St Enda's is unlike any other school in Ireland. It offers lots of subjects that have never been available to Irish children, except perhaps the very few whose parents can afford to send them to England for an education. Here boys are prepared to become 'complete men' – whatever that means. We study art and drama and music as well as scholarly subjects. A lot of time is spent on sports to make us strong and healthy, and we learn practical things like building and plumbing and how to sew and mend our clothes. Also, St Enda's is bilingual. The Head went to Belgium to study the way bilingual

schools there are organised. Most of our studies, except for French and Latin, are taught through the Irish.

I hate the Irish language, it's the language of poverty. Unfortunately it's one thing we have no choice about.

I wonder if my father realised this is a bilingual school? If he knew he might not make me stay here. He shares the government's contempt for everything Irish. The attitude is: everything that's English or from England is noble and fine. Anything that's Irish – meaning native to this country – is dirty and stupid.

Why would anyone go to all the trouble to create a school like St Enda's for boys who are dirty and stupid?

My first weekend at St Enda's will be hard. I know I'll feel lonelier than ever. The day pupils will go home and only a few of us will be left here. There used to be more boarders but some of them have dropped out. The Head and the other teachers support a political movement which is not popular with everyone. Irish nationalism.

I don't see why a school should be involved in politics. Politics is as boring as history, which I hate. Neither has anything to do with me. While my classmates and I are on our way to the refectory, I say in a rather loud voice, 'Studying things that happened donkey's years ago is as stupid as studying a language nobody uses anymore.'

We return from our collation to find the Head in our classroom, writing on the blackboard. He puts down the chalk, gives me a long look, and leaves the room. On the blackboard is written, 'The Irish language is your special birthright. It is a secret code that belongs only to you.'

I never had a secret code before.

To my surprise, I have learned that the students do most of the maintenance at St Enda's. That includes caring for the grounds. I wonder what Aunt Nell would say if she knew her nephew had become a common labourer. I'll bet Roger doesn't do any gardening in Rathgar.

My first Saturday at the school is fine and dry, so we are put to digging flower beds under the supervision of Michael MacRory, the gardener here. Mr MacRory has a baldy head. Some of the boys slag him about it, but he just laughs and says, 'Sure grass never grew on a busy street.'

I am quietly pleased to see that Mr MacRory gives Roger a big shovel and assigns him to do some heavy digging. Roger mutters a lot under his breath until Mr MacRory says, 'Speak up lad, share the joke with all of us!' Roger turns bright red and digs silently.

When we finish the flower beds we set out new shrubs and rake the pathways. Other schools would

hire a whole crew of men for such work, but here the students take care of everything ourselves. We even collect and burn the rubbish.

I never planted a bush before. When I turn over the soil with my spade the earth smells sweet.

On Sunday I go to Mass with the other Catholic boarders. In the afternoon we gather on the lawn. The sun is out and the house glimmers like gold in its green setting. The fragrance of fairy cakes baking in the kitchen drifts across out to us. I suppose St Enda's isn't so bad. In fact it's really quite beautiful.

It's peaceful here, too. I believe the word is 'serene'. One has a sense of being far away from everything that is ugly or troubling.

Serene was one of Mam's favourite words.

As we sit in a circle on the grass, one of our teachers, Mr MacDonagh, who writes poems and lectures at university, reads Irish poetry aloud to us. His full name is Thomas MacDonagh and he helped Mr Pearse found this school. Mr MacDonagh reads slowly, pronouncing the words clearly so we don't miss any. He is a cheerful, friendly little man who tells funny stories, some of them in Irish. Even if I don't understand the language I can understand his expressions and gestures.

I'm surprised by the rhythm of the old language. It sounds almost like singing, the way Mam used to sing

around the house before she fell ill. When the other boys laugh, I ask to know the joke too. Thomas repeats the Irish, gives the English translation, then recites in Irish again.

‘Now,’ he says, ‘who can repeat that last line in English?’ Most of the boys put up their hands and he selects one. I could have done it myself if I wanted to.

Then he asks, ‘Who can say the last line in Irish?’

I still don’t put up my hand, but I think I could do that too. I might not be able to pronounce every word correctly, but I could come close. I know I could. It’s a witty poem about a wicked king and a brave poet who put him to shame. If I memorise the entire poem for Mam, maybe I can make her laugh.

If – I mean when – she gets stronger, I should like to bring her out here. Maybe the Pearses would give her a room with windows looking toward the mountains. In such a serene setting, I just know she would get well.

When the lilacs bloom I could bring her armloads of blossom for her room. Lilac is her favourite scent.